Decoding Politicians' Instagram Profiles: How Visual and Textual Cues Shape Perceptions of Left-Right Alignment and Populist Traits.
A Visual Conjoint Experiment.

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Research questions

► **RQ1:** Which types of content (i.e. **political** and **apolitical cues**) on politicians' social media profiles increase the likelihood that users perceive them as **right-wing**?

   ► **RQ1.1:** Do **apolitical cues** remain significant in shaping perceptions of a politician's ideological position when **explicit political stances on policy issues** are present?

► **RQ2:** To what extent do the cues that lead respondents to perceive a politician as **right-wing** overlap with those that make them perceive the politician as **populist**?

Why it matters

► The literature on political inferences from apolitical cues is recent and **still underdeveloped** (Carlson & Settle, 2022; Lee, 2021; Scaduto & Negri, 2024).

► Current studies:

    ► Mostly focus on the **U.S.**.

    ► Examine **ordinary individuals** (exception: Clifford, 2020).

    ► Consider only the **left-right** dimension.

    ► Lack explicit **political information**.

    ► Present very **few stimuli** (often just one), despite real-world exposure to multiple cues.

    ► Rely on tabular survey experiments with **low ecological validity**.

Our contribution

► Our study:
  ► Covers **four European multiparty systems** (Italy, Sweden, France, and the Czech Republic).
  ► Examines political inferences about **politicians**.
  ► Analyzes both the left-right dimension and **populist attitudes**, comparing them.
  ► Incorporates **explicit political information**, particularly on policy issues.
  ► Exposes respondents to **multiple stimuli** simultaneously.
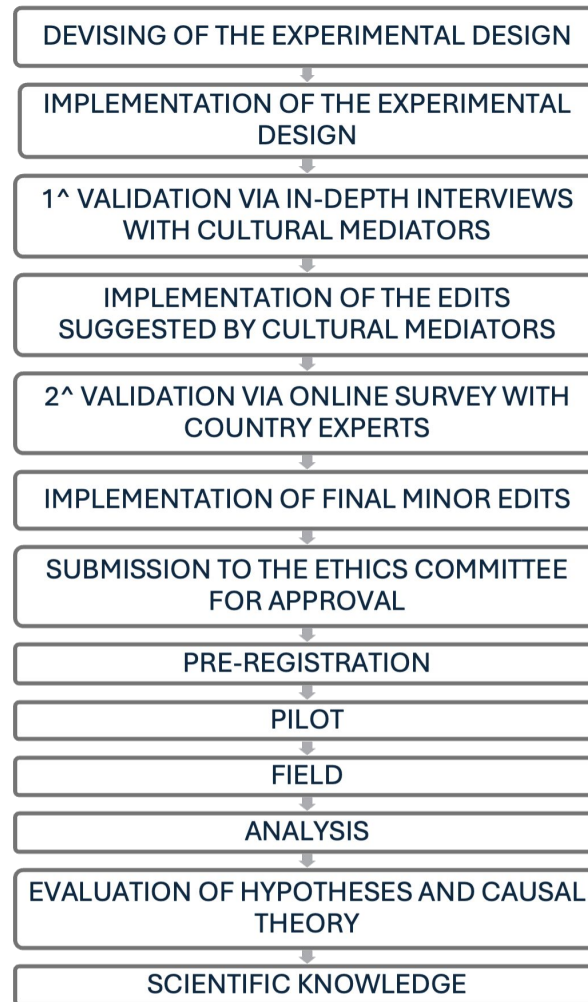 ► Generates **fictional Instagram profiles**.

Increasing ecological validity

Our political and apolitical cues

► We created fictional Instagram profiles of politicians featuring the following content:

1. **Sociodemographic traits** (gender, age, ethnicity, occupation)
2. Lifestyle choices (preferences related to **food** and **pets**)
3. Statements on **policy issues** (views on taxation and public expenditures)
4. Statements on **valence issues** (our honesty/ their corruption)
5. Images reflecting an **élite-versus-people dichotomy**
6. Images reflecting a **nostalgia for a "golden past" versus hope for the future dichotomy**

► Some are derived from the literature, others are exploratory (e.g., pets).

Main hypotheses

Attribute	Right-wing inference	Populist inference	Exploratory
Male vs female	+	+	
Old vs young	+		X for populist inference
White vs black	+	+	
Occupation	Job associated with high level of economic capital (eco and cultural capitals are expected to interact negatively)	Job associated with low level of cultural capital (eco and cultural capitals are expected to interact positively)	
Food	Meat-based food vs ethnic or vegan food	Meat-based food vs ethnic or vegan food Cheap food vs expensive food	
Dogs vs cats			X
Positional issues: less taxes (in blue) vs more expenditures (in red)	+		X for populist inference
Negative vs positive campaign to frame positional issues		+	X for right-wing inference
Valence issues: their corruption vs our honesty		+	X for right-wing inference
People in a business-like environment (élite) vs people in a protest-like environment (people)	+ (this may interact with people's ethnic background)	- (this may interact with people's ethnic background)	
Golden past vs hope for the future		+	X for right-wing inference

Research protocol

DEVISING OF THE EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

↓

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

↓

1^ VALIDATION VIA IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS WITH CULTURAL MEDIATORS

↓

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EDITS SUGGESTED BY CULTURAL MEDIATORS

↓

2^ VALIDATION VIA ONLINE SURVEY WITH COUNTRY EXPERTS

↓

IMPLEMENTATION OF FINAL MINOR EDITS

↓

SUBMISSION TO THE ETHICS COMMITTEE FOR APPROVAL

↓

PRE-REGISTRATION

↓

PILOT

↓

FIELD

↓

ANALYSIS

↓

EVALUATION OF HYPOTHESES AND CAUSAL THEORY

↓

SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE

Case selection and data collection

Case selection
- ► Italy, France, Czech Republic, and Sweden were selected to:
    - ► maximize variability across **EU macro-regions**;
    - ► ensure the inclusion of **different types of populist parties** (left-wing, right-wing, and valence populists);
    - ► ensure cross-country comparability in **affective polarization**, which may increase respondents' tendency to infer others' ideological leanings from cues.

The data collection
- ► Survey fielded in October 2024 (Tot N=6000 ▫5099 after cleaning).
    - ► N=1500 individuals per country (target) completed a CAWI questionnaire (representative in terms of age, gender, region, and education - best effort on the latter).

The visual conjoint experiment (1)

The stimulus:

- Is **mainly visual** (some items include written sentences)
- Respondents see **two images** generated from randomly extracted "visual blocks".
- These images resemble **politicians' Instagram profiles**.

Why Instagram?

- A **key platform** for online political communication (Larsson, 2021)
- Politicians act as **"influencer politicians",** showcasing also their private lives, lifestyles, and personal side (Starita & Trillò, 2022; Farkas & Bene, 2021).
- Its **visual nature** aligns well with our study design.

The visual conjoint experiment (2)

- **15.000 fictional profiles per country** are generated through an R script.

- For every task, two fictional profiles are randomly selected and shown to the respondents, **keeping track** of the features of every profile for the subsequent analysis.

- Every attribute in the profile is **randomized uniformly**.

  - Except for ethnicity, where the attribute level "White" has a probability of 0.95, "Black" of 0.05.

- Every respondent performs **5 tasks** (thus sees 10 profiles).

  - For each task, the respondents are asked **which one of the two politicians they consider more right-wing and more populist**.

The empty template

[PROFILE PICTURE]

111 post **780** follower **233** follow

[NAME]

[JOB] {CANDIDACY}

follow

[PICTURE: POLICY ISSUE]	[PICTURE: FOOD]	[PICTURE: PAST vs FUTURE]
[PICTURE: ELITE vs PEOPLE]	[PICTURE: VALENCE ISSUE]	[PICTURE: PET]
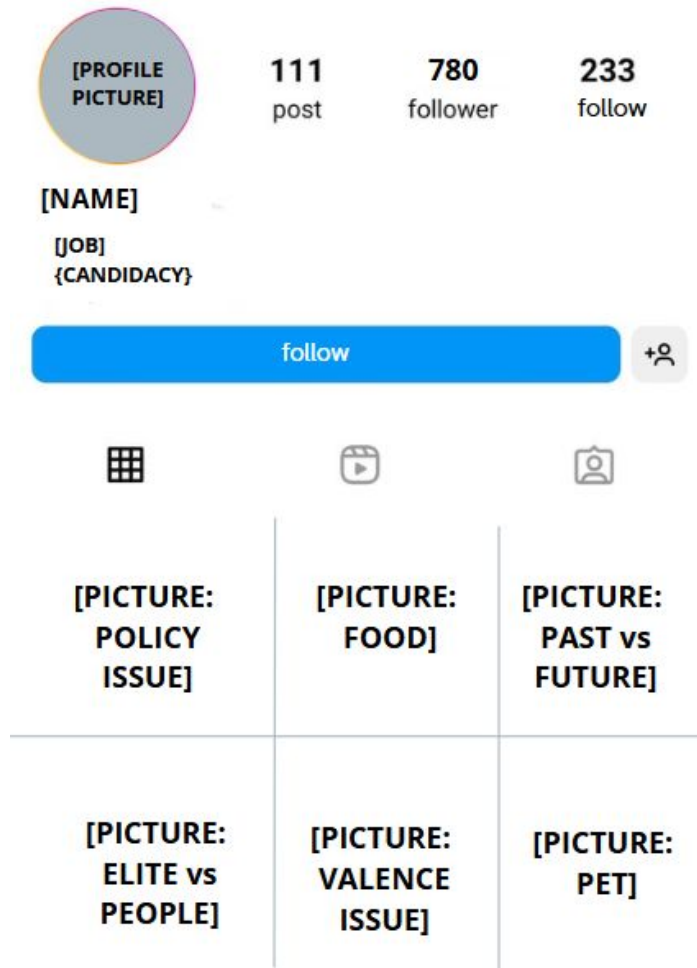
Profile attributes

- **Gender:** Male vs. Female **Visual**
- **Age:** 35 vs. 70 **V**
- **Ethnicity:** White vs. Black **V**
- **Occupation:** Entrepreneur, High-School Teacher, Waiter, Lawyer, Politician **Textual**

- **Name and Family Name Selection Textual:**
  - 5 most popular names and family names in each country (official statistics) + validated by AI and cultural mediators.

    Example (France): Emma, Louise, Jade, Alice, Sabine, Louis, Gabriel, Jean, Michel, Arthur.

  - For Black politicians, names and family names were selected from Senegal, a common origin among African immigrants in the studied countries.

    Example (Senegal): Fatou, Amina, Mariama, Mohamed, Ibrahim, Ousmane, Abdoulaye.

The profile pics

The profile pics

Policy issues (V+T)

Negative framing

Tagli sulla sanità pubblica

VERGOGNA!

Leggi qui per saperne di più →

Troppe tasse per le imprese

VERGOGNA!

Leggi qui per saperne di più →

Positive framing

Sanità pubblica. Vogliamo più

INVESTIMENTI

Leggi qui per saperne di più →

Per le imprese vogliamo

MENO TASSE

Leggi qui per saperne di più →

Their corruption vs our honesty (V+T)

Two functional equivalents to ensure the respondent did not see the same image too many times.

ENSEMBLE, AVEC HONNÊTETÉ!
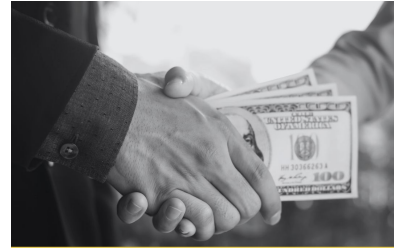
STOP À LA CORRUPTION!

AVEC HONNÊTETÉ, ENSEMBLE!

EN FINIR AVEC LA CORRUPTION!

People vs élite (V)

Mixed

White

Golden past vs future (V+T)

Two functional equivalents.

Food (V)

Dogs vs cats (V)

Two functional equivalents.

To be honest, we suspect this dog to be associated with right-wing inference.

The task: example 1 (IT)

Giovanni Esposito

Cameriere
Candidato alla Camera dei Deputati

111 post   780 follower   233 follow

follow

Tagli sulla sanità pubblica
VERGOGNA!
Leggi qui per saperne di più

CON NOI, PER UN FUTURO MIGLIORE

CON ONESTÀ, INSIEME!

Aissatou Diouf

Insegnante
Candidata alla Camera dei Deputati

111 post   780 follower   233 follow

follow

Tagli sulla sanità pubblica
VERGOGNA!
Leggi qui per saperne di più

CON NOI, PER UN FUTURO MIGLIORE

INSIEME, CON ONESTÀ!

The task: example 2 (IT)

Teresa Romano

| 111 post | 780 follower | 233 follow |

Insegnante
Candidata alla Camera dei Deputati

follow

Sanità pubblica. Vogliamo più **INVESTIMENTI**
Leggi qui per saperne di più

CON NOI, PER UN FUTURO MIGLIORE
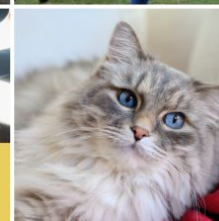
BASTA CORRUZIONE!

Cheikh Sow

| 111 post | 780 follower | 233 follow |

Cameriere
Candidato alla Camera dei Deputati

follow

Per le imprese vogliamo **MENO TASSE**
Leggi qui per saperne di più
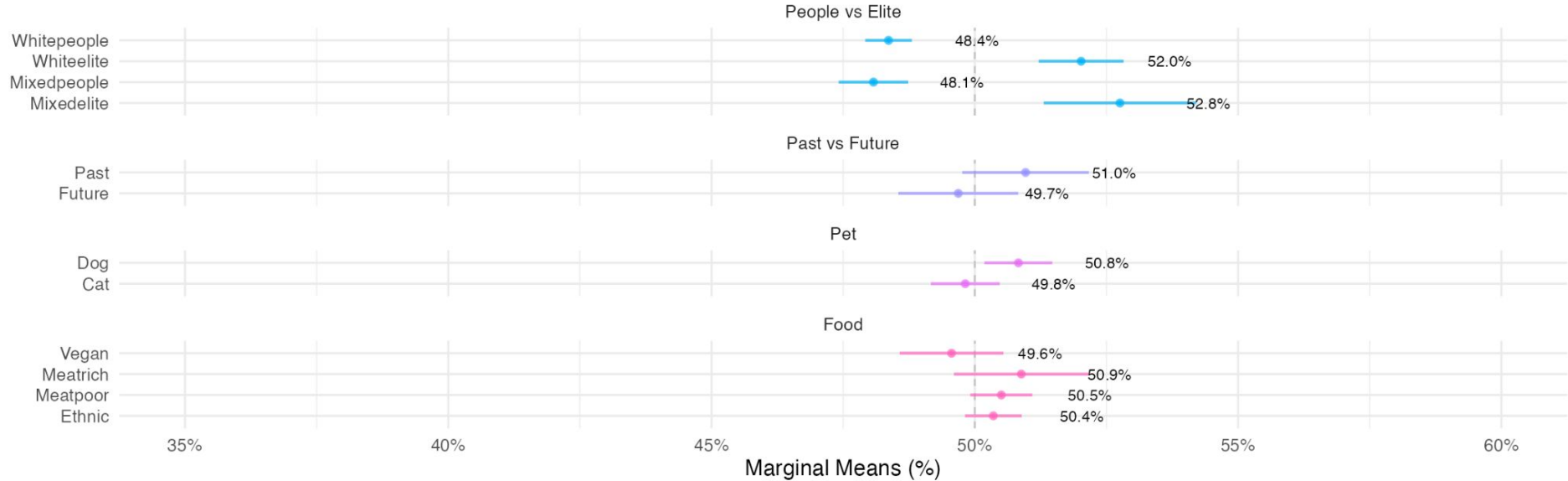
CON NOI, PER TORNARE GRANDI

INSIEME, CON ONESTÀ!
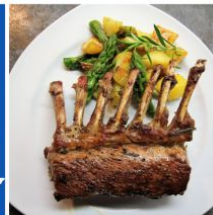
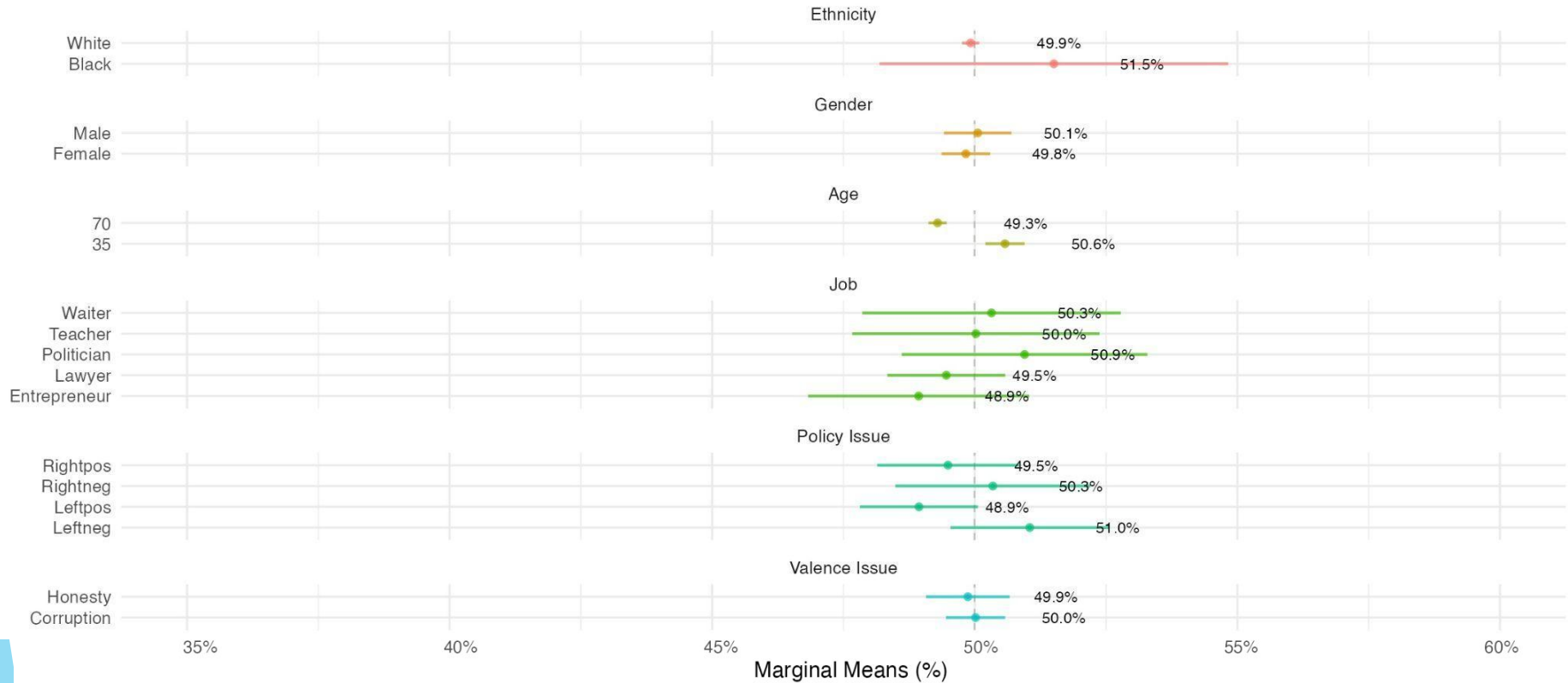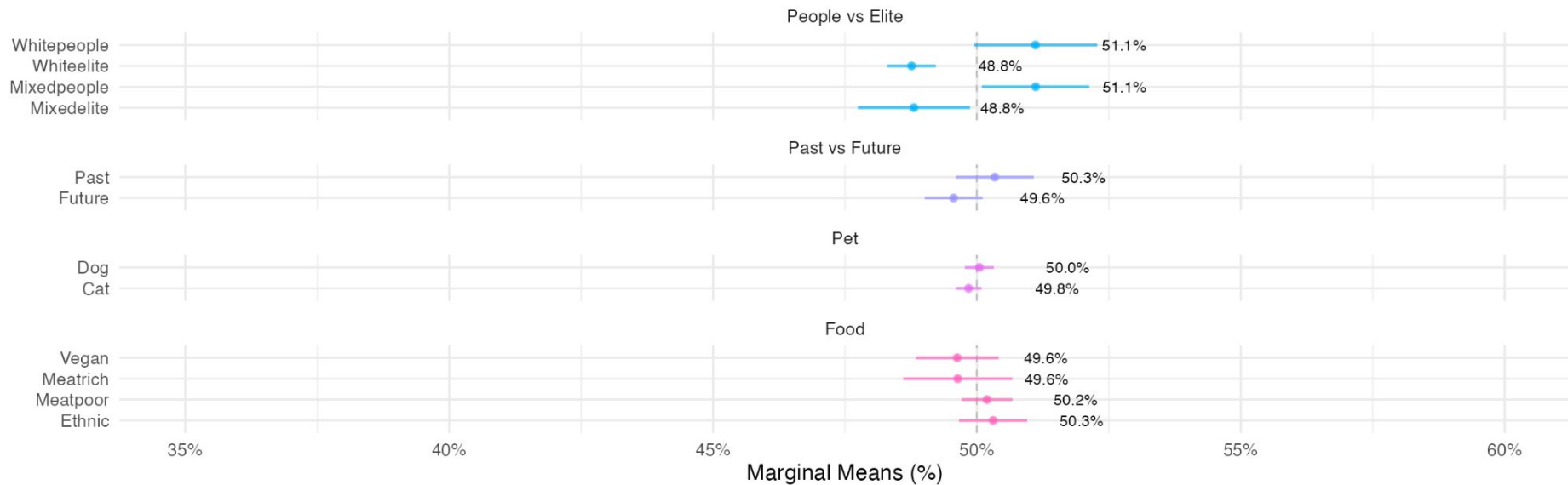# Results - Y=Right w. - Pooled (1)
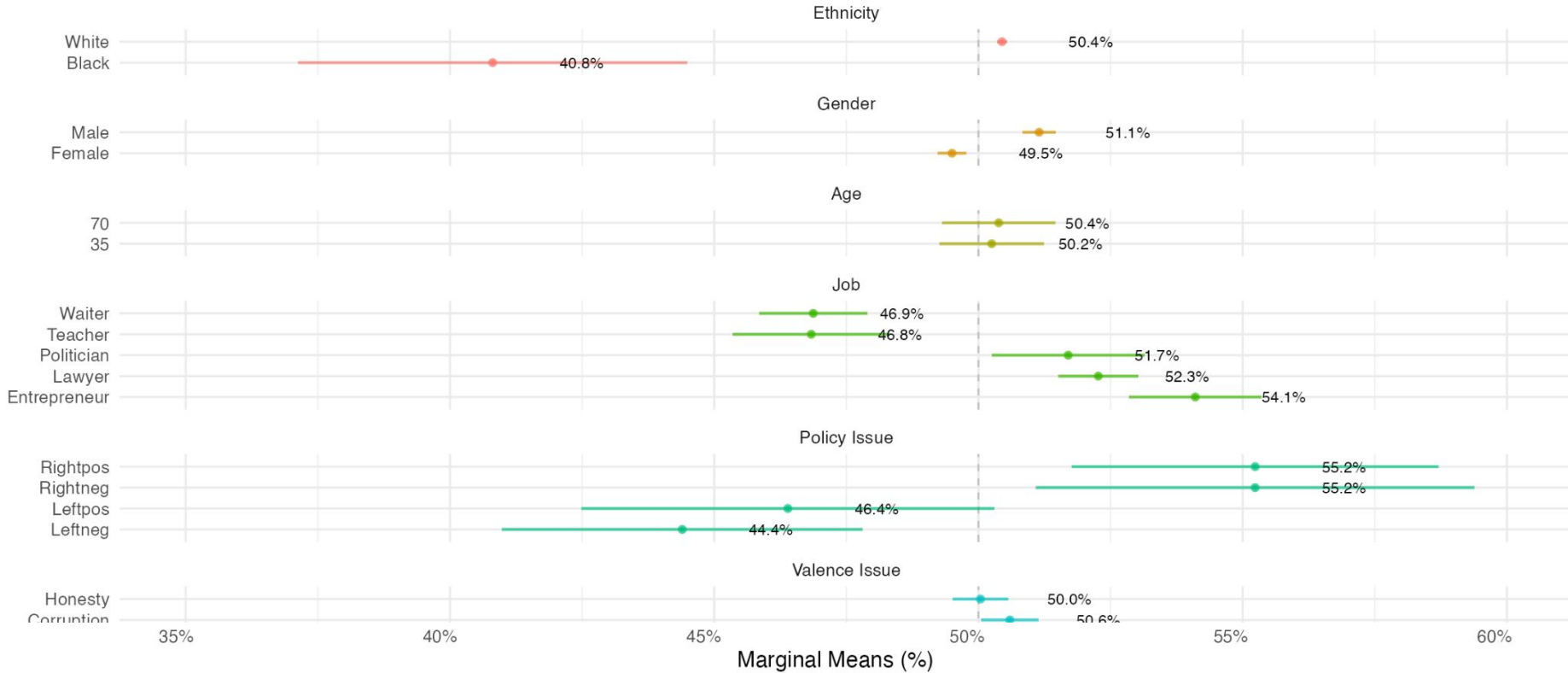
Results – Y=Right w. – Pooled (2)

Results - Y=Populism - Pooled (1)

Results - Y=Populism - Pooled (2)

By country analyses - DV=Right-wing (2)
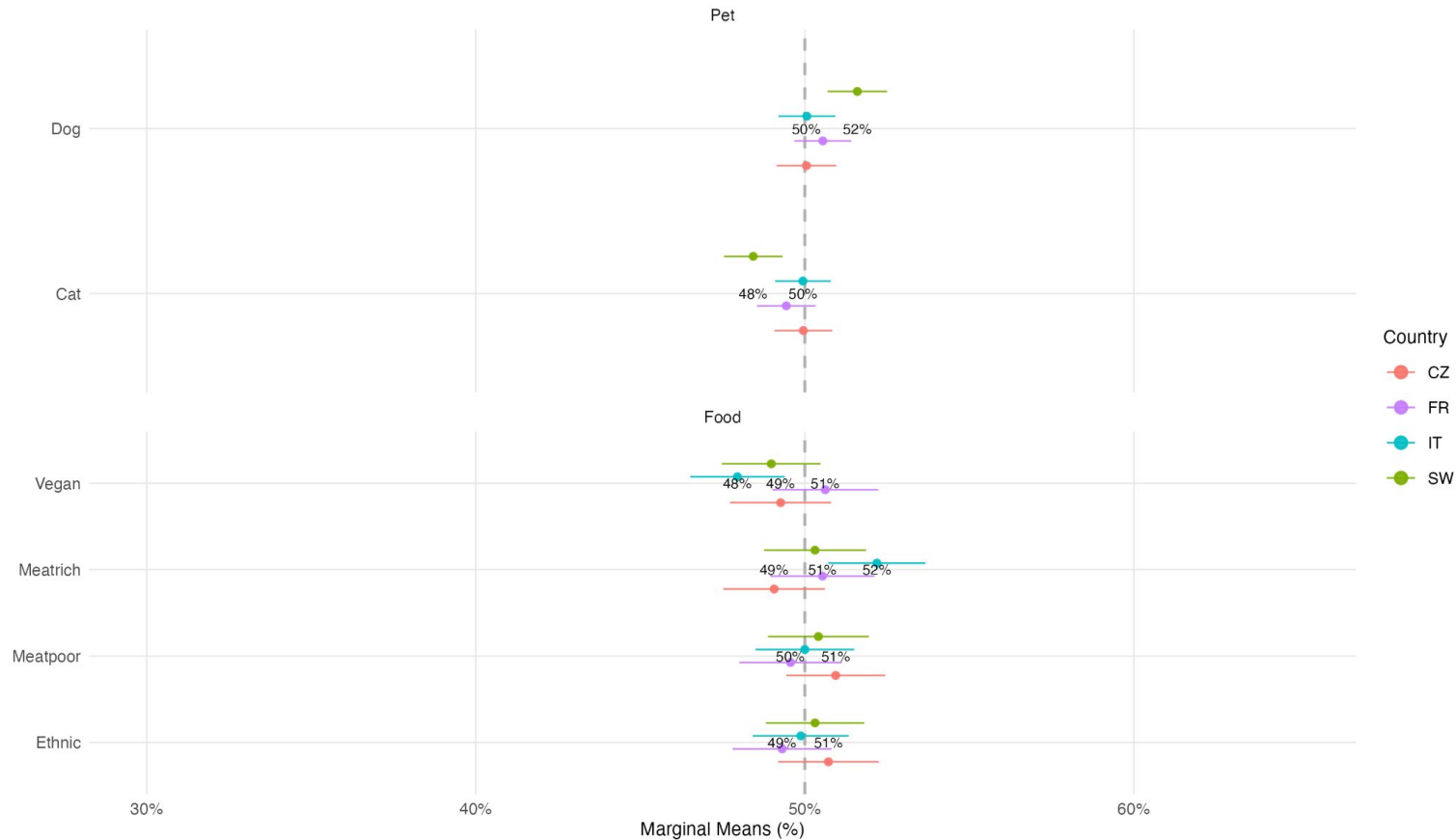
Key findings (1)

- The **cues** that lead respondents to perceive a politician as **right-wing do not coincide** with those that make them consider a politician **populist**.
  - This proves once more that populism and right-wing ideology are distinct concepts.

- **Strong country-level differences** emerge, with **CZ** often behaving in the opposite way compared to other countries (likely due to its post-Soviet background).

- The concept of **what it means to be populist** varies across countries, suggesting a need for further investigation → We have an open question on this aspect.

Key findings (2)

► The only cues that appear consistent **across countries** are:

 ► Being male → Right-wing
 ► Being black → Left-wing
 ► Having a high economic capital profession → Right-wing
 ► Policy issues:
  ► Lower taxes (blue) → Right-wing
  ► More expenditures (red) → Left-wing
 ► Elite attire (irrespective of ethnicity) → Right-wing

 ► Being young vs old → Populist attitude
 ► People representation → Populist attitude

Key findings (3)

► Political cues (especially **policy issues**) and those pointing to the **economic status** (the "old" **capital/labor divide)** still play a key role in shaping ideological perceptions, despite national idiosyncrasies.

► **Apolitical and lifestyle cues** are **more marginal** and **strongly context-dependent**.

► Overall, the visual conjoint design proves to be a **promising heuristic tool** for future research.

Open Questions: Main Focus and Framing

► Should the analysis of the politician's ideological positioning and populist appeal be kept together in a single paper or split into two?

► Should we focus on specific attributes and treat the others as control variables, or consider all equally?

Further Analyses to Be Conducted

Interaction Between Profile Attributes
- ► Objective: Assess whether specific attribute combinations increase the likelihood of a profile being perceived as right-wing/populist.
- ► Method: Average Component Interaction Effects (ACIEs).

Interaction Between Respondent and Profile Characteristics
- ► Objective: Identify projection mechanisms where respondents' attributes influence their perception of politicians' profiles.
- ► Method: Subgroup analyses.

Thank you for your attention!

For any questions, feedback, or collaboration opportunities, feel free to reach out.

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Looking forward to your insights and discussion!